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AUTHOR Clovis, George A.
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ABSTRACT

There are several signs that a college can use to determine if a program needs evaluation from a consumer point of view. Answers to the following questions can be very revealing: How many students start the program per year? How many graduate per year? What do they do when they graduate? How much money do they make? How long do they remain in the job related to their training? What do employers say about the graduates? Finding the answers to these questions can help the college determine if a program should be supported, modified, or discontinued. Such an evaluation of the Dental Assisting program at Parkersburg Community College (PCC) was instigated when the enrollment and graduation rates began to steadily decline. The evaluation found that although the training was good, it was not necessary because those dentists who used dental assistants gave them extensive on-the-job training and did not consider prior training essential. The program was eventually phased out. In another instance, an evaluation of the Welding Technology program at PCC revealed that despite the low graduation rates, which had been of administrative concern, the program was meeting the training needs of students for an entry-level position. The student consumer is becoming very selective and often uses the "stop in-stop out" pattern of attendance to gain the education he/she wants. (AYC)

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THE EFFECT OF STUDENT CONSUMERISM ON PROGRAM PLANNING

A Panel Presentation to:

The Southeastern Association of
Community College Researchers

Charleston, South Carolina
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By

George A. Clovis
Director of Institutional Research
Parkersburg Community College
Parkersburg, West Virginia 26101

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The Effect of Student Consumerism of Program Planning

Community college administrators have talked for many years about the unique characteristics of the students attending their institutions. The faculty members have experienced these diverse students and have made changes in their teaching strategies and in the curricular offerings to meet the needs of these students as they have been perceived. As institutional researchers, we have noted the change in our population from one which was predominantly male to one which is decidedly female, from one which was heavy with recent high school graduates, to one which is adult, that has a full-time job, that is looking for skill development or social development or personal enrichment on a part-time basis. All of us can say that we are seeing this, but are we using what we know to modify the programs that we are offering.

Everyone can remember Lifeboy soap. When I was in high school, Lifeboy was an effective deodorant soap. The only problem was, it had an odor itself and one could always tell when it had been used. Other deodorant soaps came out that had a better "after-smell" and, as a result, Lifeboy was modified as a product. It was modified so that it could be kept on the market. Indeed, the market had changed and the consumers had forced a change in the product.

In a very similar fashion, each of our colleges has a series of program which are offered to the public for their consumption. These programs have been designed to offer a certain series of courses over a one-year or two-year pattern and end with a certificate or a degree. Very precise curricular plans are drawn up with a specified sequence of courses and these are submitted to a controlling board for review.

The discussions usually follow the sequence of looking at the number of students enrolled, then the potential number of graduates and maybe looking at the potential employment to be certain that the program completers have a reasonable chance of securing a job. In the past, higher education has been relatively lucky and the consumer has purchased the goods. However, the consumer is now becoming very selective because she or he does not have full-time to devote to education; she or he knows what she or he wants and will purchase only what is wanted in the amount that is wanted. The consumer is telling us to look at the product that is being offered, and modify it as needed.

If the college does not listen to the consumer, the college will usually waste resources trying to support a program which the public does not want to purchase. Listening to the consumer in these cases may mean modification of the program in the minimum case and discontinuance of the program as the ultimate solution.

There are several signs that the college can use to determine if a program needs evaluation from the consumer view. Answers to the following questions can be very revealing:

(1) How many students start the program per year?
(2) How many students graduate per year?
(3) What do they do when they graduate?
(4) How much money do they make?
(5) How long do they remain in the job related to their training?
(6) What do the employers say about the graduates?

In 1968, Parkersburg Community College, then known as the Parkersburg Center of West Virginia University, instituted a program in Dental Assisting. Over the next few years, the number of graduates ranged from 16 in 1970 to a high of 22 in 1973. Since 1976, the number of graduates in the program has been in a steady decline, going from 18 in 1976 to 5 in 1979.

Recent graduate follow-up surveys indicated that the graduates employed in the field were the lowest paid of all programs and in many cases were being paid at or below minimum wage levels.

During the 1978-79 year, an extensive evaluation was undertaken by the Dental Assisting faculty. Questionnaires were constructed and mailed to all graduates and to all dentists in the state of West Virginia and neighboring portions of Ohio. The graduates were asked about their employment responsibilities, their certification status, their initial salary, their present salary and their view of a reasonable salary. The dentists were asked to supply information on the number of dental assistants in their office, their certification status, starting salary for different levels of training and their preferences on type of training.

The design of the questionnaires, the mailing and initial analysis of the data was done by the Dental Assisting faculty. Input on the survey items and questionnaire design was given by the Dental Assisting Advisory Committee. This methodology is very important because it provided credibility to the study. It was their study and they were involved from the beginning. It was not done by "someone from the administration" who was "out to get them".

The responses showed that the graduates started out making the minimum wage or less in general, that they had varied responsibilities in the office form assisting chairside to being the receptionist, that they did not maintain their certification for a long period and that they did not remain dental assistants for a long time.

These responses were confirmed by the dentists. Many of the dentists did not use dental assistants and those who did gave extensive on-the-job

training to them. While they would prefer to hire a trained, certified, dental assistant, it was not critical to them.

The results of the study showed that while the training was good, it was not necessary and the cost to the consumer was not worth the reward. As a result of this study, it has been recommended that the Dental Assisting program be phased out over the next year and the associated faculty will be released.

In other cases, programs are meeting a need of the student and of the community, but the college and the governing board are looking for the wrong outcome. We are looking for program completers rather than satisfied students placed in rewarding positions.

As an example of this, I want to cite the program in Welding Technology at Parkersburg Community College. In 1974, this program was instituted providing both degree and certificate options. From the 1974 Fall Semester through the 1978 Spring Semester, 407 students had enrolled in the first course, Welding 111. From the Spring of 1975 through the Spring of 1979, 13 Certificates and 25 Degrees have been awarded; this is a completion rate of 9.3%. In addition, 11 of the Certificates and 12 of the Degrees were awarded during the 1975-76 year. At that time, the college was filled with former employees of a local industry which had recently closed and these students were receiving Veteran's Benefits and Unemployment Benefits. In order to receive the benefits the student had to be making progress toward a program objective and hence the large number of degrees and certificates.

However, many administrators have been concerned because the completion rate is so low. Investigation shows that completion of three or four

courses in the program qualifies the student for an entry level position in which he makes more per hour than most of us in this room. He does not need and does not want the Degree or Certificate. Hence, while these options should be provided, the program must be planned and the curriculum offered to meet the needs of the consumer. And most importantly, the governing board must be educated so that it understands the principal objective of the program and how the program will need to be evaluated.

The students in higher education are changing and as their characteristics change their needs and objectives will also change. A large portion of the students that are attending our institutions have objectives that they have determined can be met by the completion of selected courses. As a result, there is a much greater tendency for the student to "stop-in" and then "stop-out" as their immediate education objective is reached.

In various areas, the focus on the needs and desires of the student is beginning to be met. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems in cooperation with the College Board has just released a guide entitled "Student Outcomes Questionnaires: An Implementation Hand-Book". The first questionnaire in the longitudinal series focuses on the entering student and his or her educational objectives.

Community needs assessments are also in vogue at this time. Surveys of community leaders, industrial employers and households are being conducted to determine perceived educational needs. Large amounts of data concerning our consumers are being collected and analyzed.

It is most important that this data be incorporated into the planning of the institution. The responses may mean deletion of programs, addition of programs or modification of programs. The schedule of offerings may

need to be adjusted to evenings and weekends in order to fit the consumer needs. Colleges that will be alive and viable in the next decade will be responsive to the needs of the consumer - the student.

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